Origins of Art in Tasmania

By

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Probably no community began its art history with quite so clean a slate as did Tasmania.

Art, in the evolution of older societies, was a gradual accretion from the earth up and from ancestral heredity on. In all other transplanted offshoots of European culture—in Asia, Africa and the several Americas—a stratum of indigenous art was there to provide a root-hold, but Australia as a whole, up to the self-conscious present day, borrowed nothing either of attitude of mind or of art expression from the aboriginal Australian.

In Tasmania, there is no evidence convincing enough to prove that the Tasmanian race possessed any medium of graphic or plastic expression, unless by some idiom so far removed from ours as to be unrecognisable. It is hard to conceive any human organisation reaching a social stage without evolving some medium of art, but we can deduce an aesthetic sense only in relation to shells and stones (many of the stone implements appear to have been chosen for a satisfaction of beauty), to geometrical markings (as on the body), to the colour of red ochre; and there is some tantalisingly anonymous rock-carving.

The problem set the new Tasmanians then, was one of a landscape dehumanised. It was a search for an idiom suited to a country which had no accumulated associations of human art, a landscape with no relation to the unconscious inheritance of the inhabitants.

Landscape painting began for Australia in 1642 when Tasman appeared out of the Southern Ocean to make his terrific landfall off the south-east coast. Since the invention of the camera, no European will ever look at a scene again with a mind unconditioned by the preconceptions of the photograph, but the first Europeans to see Tasmania had this advantage over their successors that they were landscape-draughtsmen by necessity. On Tasman's chart his pilot-major drew the coast line, panorama-strip-fashion as a background and, because a trained eye selected the essentials only, the very bones of the country are recorded there.

Looking at that coast from the landward (which he did not) and taking for granted that the detail was no more than an outmoded convention, we have made a habit of emphasizing cartographical errors. It has taken us three hundred years to recognise an accuracy of observation which no following survey exceeds.

The succeeding French and English expeditions were recorded not only for cartographical and scientific purposes, but also in personal diaries by someone or another in the services who was handy with a pencil. Cook's own precise sketches illustrate all his voyages. Henry Roberts was midshipman on the *Resolution*. George Tobin came with Bligh in the *Providence* as official artist, and his 'Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land, 1792', is typical of such work. The drawing is the stiffly academic of its day, but soundly composed and topographically efficient, and no more is required or desired of an official artist.

Benjamin West selected Westall from among the Academy School's students and sent him to Flinders as topographical artist on the *Investigator*. Here is the beginning of a connection between the Academy School and the Antipodes which continues to this day. Each period has its ideological bogey: at that time West himself was an innovator, and naturalism was dangerously associated with revolution. But something of the feeling of mysterious landfalls remained with Westall and linked him later to the little coterie of romanticists deriving from Fuseli and Blake, recently discussed by Geoffrey Grigson in his life of Samuel Palmer.

The first decades in Van Diemen's Land produced a little group of Primitives which has never received much attention, probably because so little is definitely known about it. Its value lies in an unselfconscious search for a technique adaptable to unfamiliar colour and form, although with a skill usually insufficient for the job, but this virtue outranks the approach of the ready-made Academists who seldom recognised the existence of a problem for which the Academy did not show a pre-arranged solution. It parallels in a small way the primitive painting which has been fashionable in collections from the older states of America and the unsophisticated corners of Europe.

At that stage of society anyone was valuable who could record new country or take a likeness. The several sets of drawings made for reproduction in London were either lithographed or engraved and were drawn with the precise line and candid colour demanded for these processes. Lycett's water-colour drawings of Van Diemen's Land were published in 1824 (he was transported, but pardoned in 1822, and his scenes were part of Macquarie's publicity scheme for Australia). They are as neatly dated and mannered as a piece of chinoiserie and as little related to actual appearances, but they convey a feeling of the exotic—the freshness of unfamiliarity and surprise.

As Bernard Smith says in *Place, taste, and tradition* (where this period is covered very well), the public 'wanted to know the facts about the colony and the growing romantic sensibility of the time demanded that these facts be picturesque'. This is scarcely art, but it is the struggle after lucid expression of a new experience for transmission to someone at a distance. It follows the cartographers in search for an acceptable convention to express the strange colour and growth of the Tasmanian bush. It is a matter for accuracy, clarity, and selection of the significant, and at its best can become an admirably efficient craftsmanship.

There were many who had this desire to record what they saw, among them Lieutenant Simpkinson de Wesselow of His Majesty's Magnetic Observatory in Hobart, a nephew of the Franklins—always a family of wide interests. The work which he did during the time he was stationed there is sound and fastidious water-colour style, used with economical handling of tinted paper and occasional accents

of body-colour. But there are examples much less sophisticated. Hobart Town was drawn time and again. Port Arthur was illustrated in detail. Mr. Allen was attacked by aborigines in 1828. Each of these things evoked an emotional reaction. And, lagging a little late in time, an admirable drawing by A. Benbow of Oyster Cove in 1847, 'Settlers and Aborigines'. The pity is that he used only pencil for so large an undertaking. It is characteristically primitive in lateral spacing and parallel picture-plane, and has a mural quality which would be well regarded to-day.

Work of this type was executed most frequently in water-colour or pencil, 'a transportable and economic equipment', and one which inspires ungrounded confidence in the inexperienced practitioner. Hobart Town, however, achieved one group of topical mural paintings. These were discovered some years ago in the dismantling of a public house, but unfortunately we have no clear record of them.

Some contributed nothing to the solution of our problem, among them William Gould who had been transported. His work as a china painter locates him fairly accurately. It has all the associations of a small country inn and, indeed, every tavern in Hobart Town could have produced the elements of an exhibition of his still-life in fruit, dead game, and cutlery—the very illustration for a butler's pantry—congealed in a galantine of brown varnish. Gould was prolific and skilful, but poorly served in his materials. He painted largely on wood, with evidently inferior oil, and the whole submerges in darkness with advancing time. His life in Van Diemen's Land, fortunately enough, perhaps, added no impact to his experiences.

The portrait painter was not so early on the scene, but within a year of each other, Lempriere and Bock arrived in Hobart Town. Thomas James Lempriere came of a banking and commercial family of Calais with an ambiguous nationality which made trouble both in the Napoleonic Wars and the Bourbon restoration. The family emigrated to Van Diemen's Land in 1823, and in 1827, when an employee absconded and the family firm went insolvent, Lempriere took a position with the Commissariat Department. His portraits of the O'Hara Booths hang in the Tasmanian Art Gallery, and are something in advance of sign-painting.

Thomas Bock made likenesses 'somewhat after the style of Lawrence' but was chiefly an engraver and miniaturist. He engraved the Colony's early bank notes, and made, for the records, pencil drawings of men condemned to be hanged, and portraits of the aborigines, drawn for Lady Franklin. His best work has a swift and business-like economy, and a quality of human warmth; it was often unsigned, so that his reputation has covered a number of doubtful attributes.

This professional group was the equivalent of to-day's commercial artist, technically competent and meeting a tangible need of the community without claiming any particular status in art.

The next thread runs direct from Burlington House, but contributes little that is permanent in the general pattern; it is easy to overrate the importance of Wainewright and Glover.

So far as Van Diemen's Land was concerned Wainewright, transported in 1837, was an accident. He belongs to a semi-decadent, over-sophisticated borderland of art which had considerable vogue among the connoisseurs of the day. With Fuseli and a few other half-forgotten fashionables he illustrated a macabre other-world which had some geographical relation to the Castle of Otranto. They were showing in the Academies of 1821 to 1825. Their drawings were technically

admirable, far more vital than the full-dress paintings. Drawings sold easily then and produced quick returns in income and reputation. Reproduced among such curiosities as Sacheverell Sitwell's *Splendours and Miseries*, they still carry a faintly gruesome aura of the coterie and the period, a definite hang-over from the 18th century.

The current term is ' psycho-pathic ', Wainewright's abnormal streak rendering him a short-sighted poisoner and an indifferent forger. So good a draughtsman should have made his calligraphy proof against detection. The characteristics which transported him to Van Diemen's Land were the same that prevented any later rehabilitation. He made the most of his reputation for diabolism and drug-taking. (It is not clear how he was supposed to get the drug.) The portraits, which were all the work he did in Van Diemen's Land, are innocent enough though most have an effeminate charm slightly tainted with decay. Their finished draughtsmanship set a professional standard, as valuable to the colony of the day as an overseas exhibition is in ours. When he died in 1847, befriended by a prison doctor and, characteristically, a black cat, he had long out-lasted the movement which produced him.

John Glover was 63 when he came to Van Diemen's Land in 1831, with a standing reputation as a fashionable teacher and painter, as a friend of Louis XVIII, and as the foundation president of the Old Water-Colour Society. The son of a farmer, he made a home on the Nile under Ben Lomond, calling the place Patterdale after the familiar name in the north of England. It was a patriarchal establishment, with a son who farmed the land and made picture frames of native woods. But his hand and mind were fixed in England and the Continent, and a penultimate 20 years' residence in Van Diemen's Land added nothing to his mental experiences. His oils are tight, fixed and mosaiced in the brown gravy of 18th Century English School; they have a chilly line, and a cautious niggling quality. The impression is that the unfamiliar materials worried and eluded him. The academic convention is made to serve equally for the Tamar and the Arno. But the monochrome sketches and wash-drawings he brought with him, early continental studies, show the contact of the Classic tradition and a suggestion of the breadth and freedom associated with Claude. The self-portrait also, which hangs in the Launceston Gallery, shows a sound 18th Century breadth of handling under its penumbra of darkened oil.

Benjamin Duterreau, also, was established in life and reputation when he arrived in Hobart Town. He came in 1832, eighteen months after Glover, and was four years older. Like Bock, he was a professional engraver and portrait painter. His family was Huguenot by descent—himself by birth a Londoner—and he had the dubious assistance of vice-regal interest, for his daughter was the governess of Col. Arthur's children. Of his work there remains a number of documentary records, very stilted by official patronage, but that would seem to give no occasion for his making so little use of the dramatic possibility of ' The Conciliation ' (Tasmanian Art Gallery), the inept draughtsmanship being hard to account for. It is possible that he could not draw and the big figure composition found it out, but his style has a painterly colour and an architecture of tone-values which are more continental than English. He made a painting of ' Sullivan's Cove in 1839 ' (Launceston Art Gallery) located somewhere in the Renaissance, stormy in colour, and rich in texture. It may not be very like Hobart, but it goes straight back in depth behind the frame instead of being laterally spaced in the picture plane. In the Tasmanian Art Gallery there is also a sketch of the New Town races in 1836,

broadly painted in a high, fresh key, and well in step with forerunners of Impressionism. If Hobart had ever looked at it, a visiting exhibition of contemporary French and English painting would have caused less amazement.

Art had become analytical when John Skinner Prout arrived on the colonial scene in 1843, ten years after Duterreau. He was himself a very tolerable landscapist in the early tradition of English water-colour drawing, and a friend of Glover. Soon he had organised an exhibition of pictures in the Legislative Council Chamber in Hobart, and thus made history, for it was the first in Australia. The Hobart Town Courier gave a column and a half to a letter from 'M' in its issue of January 9th, 1845, a stately critique of the show. Reynolds, Turner, Cuyp, Vandyck, either in the original or copied, and engravings after them, brought into the colony by well-to-do settlers, were alien, but Mrs. Allport painted waratahs, Mr. Kaye showed Circular Head, the Bocks had portraits and the Bishop of Tasmania the head of a monk, all against a background of dark maroon hangings. Upwards of 300 pictures had been shown at the Hobart exhibition and when Launceston followed, in January, 1848, with an exhibition in their Mechanics Institute, an equal number was shown.

Australia developed about this time an art consciousness, and Van Diemen's Land made something of a centre for it. This was the period of the Mechanics Institutes and popular educational opportunity. In 1844, the year before the Hobart Exhibition, Prout had given six lectures 'On the Cultivation of the Fine Arts, with practical illustrations', to the Hobart Institute. The Launceston Exhibition was likewise the occasion for rhetoric: Mr. James Smith spoke on the 'Principles of the Art of Painting' and Rev. J. West on 'The Arts in their Intellectual and Social Relationships'. The movement was the outflung ripple of the wave which carried Morris and Ruskin.

In answer to the 18th Century's humanism, came the 19th Century's established middle class. Painting took on the virtue of moral uplift, the beautiful became the good, or, alternatively, became that which gave pleasure to the good man. Art, about that stage, wound up the clock on Sundays and took the family to Church. To be respectable, art must obviously be a business success, but it should not forget responsibility for the less privileged classes. In all gravity, although the century showed throughout a shocking deterioration of taste in the educated classes, it opened up broader possibilities of democratic education.

Launceston, having the advantage of semi-isolation, developed something of an independent art circle, representative of the tastes and interest of the town's close-knit society. Apart from the standard set by Glover, the north led off with such talented amateurs as Capt. Lyttleton and Louis Wood. Robert Dowling, son of Launceston's first Baptist Minister, left records of the aborigines of Tasmania, painted portraits of Royalty, and continued Westall's connection with the Royal Academy. Robert Beauchamp, who lived on the West Tamar and imported merino sheep, was another prolific landscapist; and Fred Strange left water-colour impressions of early Launceston which are more lively than some of his southern and mainland records.

Another definite strand in the pattern, probably the most tenacious, came from Jane Austen's England with the drawing room accomplishments of the officers' wives and daughters. In a period when every young lady could be expected to deal with flowers and romantic landscape, the cultural foundations of Tasmania's society were provided for. And as the colony has always shown a tendency to matriarchy it is logical that the most widely popularised authority for the life,

landscape, and natural history of early Tasmania should be charmingly-mannered volumes of Mrs. Meredith, that R. M. Johnston's *Geology of Tasmania* should be illustrated by the pencil of Mrs. Sprent, and that, with a time-lag of three generations, the identical attack and idiom should survive in common use to-day.

In out-post society, it is the women who keep up the lingering levels of culture. Consequently, the picture-looking public of the Georgian era had its mind pre-conditioned by the albums of its Victorian grandmothers, and this fact underlies the preponderence of still-life, flowers and water-colour landscape in the catalogues of local exhibitions to-day.

So much for the portraits and flowers, normal adjuncts of polite society. The search for a Tasmanian idiom became a local problem with the birth of William Charles Piguenit in 1836 at 'Claremont House', Elizabeth Street, Hobart. He was the first painter whose emotional and technical experience derived wholly from the country, the first also to tackle the untouched landscape possibilities of that dehumanised mountain area lying beyond and above the settlements. Much of the country he painted is far from being well-recorded in Tasmanian Art Circles to-day. He followed in the legitimate line of descent from the topographers, together with other surveyor-draughtsmen such as Calder and Frankland, but added a small legacy from the Romantic Movement. He retired early from the Surveys Department and expanded on large canvases his reputation as a landscape painter. The period rewarded such. Burlington House hung acres of Shaggy Heath; the Queen wrote Journals of the Scottish Highlands; and several metres of romantic scenery made a safe investment in property for successful business men.

In 1887 Piguenit lectured (again the period touch) on Olympus and Frenchman's Cap, and again in 1892 at the Hobart Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science. Improvement is linked with the aesthetic; botanical terms are bracketed with colloquial names. But it is just to remember him as a surveyor. A great deal of physiographical data is accurately recorded in his, largely monochrome, oils. He received the Wynne Prize in 1901.

Piguenit's death in 1914 brings the pattern down to the present generation, and John Eldershaw's water-colours, where they fall on mountain scenery, may be claimed in direct descent. This in spite of the fact that the Eldershaw palette bears no more relation to Tasmania than did Glover's and his training centred in the mainland and (or) Europe.

Three conditions are needed in any country for the development of a representative art—isolation, a small and compact society, and a strong emotional stimulus. Travel became unfortunately easy with the advancing century. The dominant influence on local artists has been, not the genius of the landscape, but the Julian Ashton School in Sydney, turning to Europe and the International Style as a good pilgrim turns to Beulah. An exhibition of Tasmanian paintings in Sydney in 1929 was predominantly work of visiting artists.

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PLATES

PLATE IX

A. Benjamin Duterreau: 'Sullivan's Cove, 1839'. (Coll.: Queen Victoria Museum.)

B. George Tobin: 'Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land, 1792'. (Coll.: Mitchell Library, by kind permission of the Trustees; block by courtesy of the Trustees, Australian Museum, Sydney.)

PLATE X

A. J. Allen: 'Mr. John Allen being attacked by Tasmanian aborigines in the Glamorgan district (East Coast) on 14th Dec., 1828'. (Coll.: Tasmanian Museum, by kind permission of the Trustees.)

B. Simpkinson de Wesselow: 'In Sassafras Valley, 1848'. (Coll.: Tasmanian Museum, by kind permission of the Trustees.)

PLATE XI

A. Benjamin Duterreau: 'George Augustus Robinson'. (Coll.: Dr. C. Craig, by kind permission.)

B. T. G. Wainewright: Portrait. (Coll.: Queen Victoria Museum.)

C. T. G. Wainewright: 'Head of a Man'. (Coll.: Queen Victoria Museum.)

D. Thomas Bock: 'Portrait of Mr. George Marshall, 1851'. (Coll.: Mr. Douglas Marshall, by kind permission.)

PLATE XII

A. T. Glover: Wash drawing. (Coll.: Queen Victoria Museum.)

B. W. C. Piguenit: 'Mt. Olympus and Lake St. Clair'. (Coll.: Tasmanian Museum, by kind permission of the Trustees.)